

Timescapes Conference

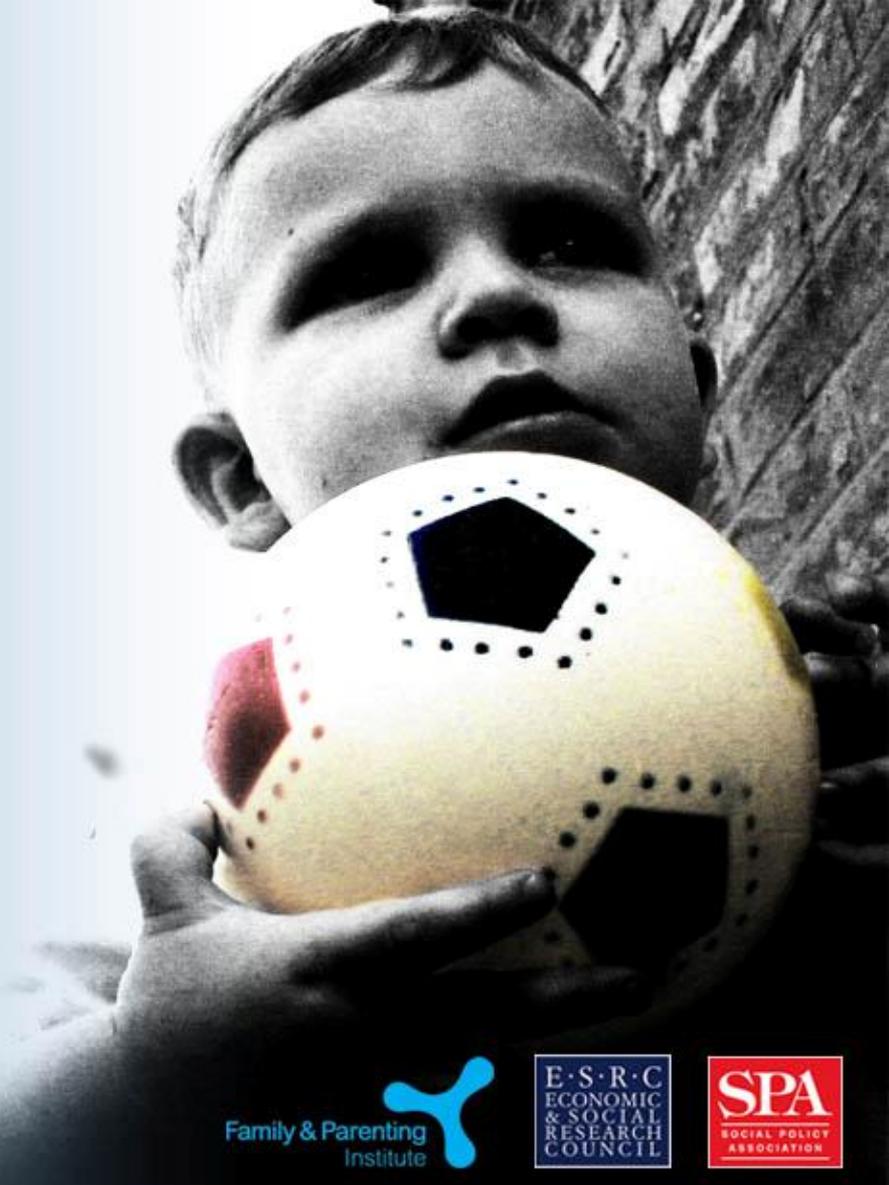
Understanding & Supporting
Families Through Time

Social relationships in transition

Older people's experiences and use of
social networks in later life

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timescapes

An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study

Resources in Later Life project

- Qualitative Longitudinal research
 - Interviews two years apart. People aged 65-84 (at W1)
- Explored how older people planned, used and valued the resources available to them and how they experienced change over time
 - Covered a wide range of resources and how they interlinked
 - Looked at change but also maintaining stability

Overview – transitions in social relationships

- Types of support (practical, financial, emotional) provided by different social networks which can help older people;
 - adjust to changes in their lives
 - to maintain stability
- How changes in family and social relationships are experienced
 - In older people's own relationships with others
 - In the lives of those around them
- Older people's support as a resource for others
- The implications of not having social networks.

Social networks as a resource

- To help adjust to changes in people's lives (in particular deteriorating health)
- To maintain stability (prevent worsening health, ensure a decent/accessible living environment, income level)
- Support provided by partners, family and friends
 - Practical help – at home, with transport, moving home
 - Financial – direct and indirect support
 - Emotional support – encouragement/advocacy, company, for couples the use of humour

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'Well I sort of laugh at her and she laughs at me when I drop things or trip or anything like that. I laugh at her when she's on floor and she can't get up, I say "shall I get you a cushion", you know that sort of thing.'

(Male, aged 78, couple household)

Changes in older people's own relationships with others

- The impact of changing health and the ability to get out and about – shrinking environment/ the importance of the home
 - Valued support from others, but reluctance to ask, loss of independence/control, changing nature of relationships
- New relationships – valued companionship/potential tension with families
- Separation/divorce in later life
- Bereavement

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F: 'This is what I've thought myself, I've thought well when you're a kiddy and you're growing up, you're learning. But when you get older, you start going backwards.

INT: In what way?

F: Well I feel as if I'm a kid again. You know, when I'm round at [daughter's] I feel as if I'm a child and she's talking to me as if I'm a child.

INT: How does that make you feel then?

F: Not very good. And I think well I suppose I am really. It's when I'm on my own and I think what I used to do, and no longer can I do it, that's the hard part. I don't accept it very well'.

(Single female, aged 79)

Transitions in the lives of friends/family of older people

- Types of changes included:
 - Family/friends moving
 - Death or illness of family and friends
 - Changes in family members lives – changing jobs, relationship breakdown
 - Changing contact and relationships with grandchildren

'A lot of friends in our age group have died in the last two years... It makes you sad and it makes you think...it makes you think three score year and ten you know, don't dwell on it really, try not to think about it too much, but when somebody does die it does bring it home to you.'

(Couple, both aged 71)

Older people's support as a resource for others

- Types of support provided included:
 - Providing practical help – childcare, cooking, washing, lifts for family members
 - Giving money or gifts to family/friends
 - Acting as a source of advice
- The impact of such support:
 - Lessens financial costs for family/friends
 - Provided a sense of purpose/role, reciprocation

The impact of the absence of social networks and implications

- Emotional well-being, loneliness, anxiety for example, in decision making about the future
- Financial impact – both direct (having to pay for help) and indirectly (through accessing benefits, grants etc).
- Lack of practical support means increased reliance on services - implications in terms of the need for provision / access to information, support, services.

- *'I had no choice, I didn't know what to do. I'd got no money, no one who can help me, so I had to be a bit brave and make a decision, you either make the right one or the wrong one. I think I made the right one.'*

(Single woman, aged 72)